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ORESTES

A Tragedy

ORESTES

A Tragedy

by

Richard Le Gallienne



NEW YORK
MITCHELL KENNERLEY
MCMX

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1910

*TO WILLIAM AND JULIE FAVERSHAM
IN FRIENDSHIP AND WITH HIGH
ADMIRATION OF THEIR
NOBLE ARTISTIC GIFTS
AND IDEALS*

The following play has been written at the instance of Mr. William Faversham, who, being desirous of producing a music-drama on the story of Orestes, to the accompaniment of Massenet's music—music originally written for Leconte de Lisle's "Les Érinnyes"—and not being satisfied with the dramatic qualities of De Lisle's play, asked me to make for him another version.

In making this version, I have, therefore, been somewhat circumscribed by the necessity of following the lead of the music, particularly in the first act, which I desire the reader to regard as a prologue, and subsidiary to the second act, which is the real play.

In both acts, as has been the case with others who have treated the theme, I have, in the main, followed Æschylus, for the dramatic action; but the interpretation of the characters, and the words which I have put into their mouths, are entirely my own.

RICHARD LE GALLIENNE

February, 1910.



DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

AGAMEMNON	King of Argos
CLYTEMNESTRA	His Wife
ORESTES	Their Son
ELECTRA	Their Daughter
CASSANDRA	Daughter of Priam, King of Troy
ÆGISTHUS	Second Husband of Clytemnestra and a cousin of Agamemnon
PYLADES	Friend of Orestes
CALLIRHOE	One of Electra's Maidens
TALTHYBIOS	} Old Men of Argos
EURYBATES	
OTHER ARGIVE ELDERS	
WATCHMAN	
A SERVANT	

THE FURIES

Chorus of Old Men. Chorus of Libation-Pourers.

Soldiers, Sailors, Captives, and Common People.

A period of ten years elapses between the first and second Acts.

ORESTES, A TRAGEDY

ACT I

SCENE I

Portico of the old palace of the Atreidæ. Just before dawn. Argos dimly seen between the columns of the palace. The Furies go silently to and fro in the shadows. The day dawns. The Furies disappear.

Old men of Argos enter, leaning on their staves, and divide into two groups, to right and left of the stage. Talthybios and Eurybates stand somewhat in front.

TALTHYBIOS.

Ten years are almost gone, and still no sight
Of their returning sails! For ten long years,
There on the palace roof, the watchman counts
The stars, and sings to keep himself awake;
But still no beacon fire from Ida flares,
In æery signal, on from cape to cape.

EURYBATES.

Was ever such a fleet upon the sea,
Or such an armoured hum of fighting souls!
'Twas hard to be old men, Talthybios,

Orestes, A Tragedy

Good but to stay at home with women and babes,
'Mid all that gleam of bronze and flash of oars,
And see their high-pooped galleys sail away.

TALTHYBIOS.

All for a woman's face—a painted flower!
So many ships, such treasure of strong men,
Beautiful strength hoarded and husbanded,
And sternly tempered in the soldier's school,
All that heroic beat of noble hearts
To such an end—to bring a wanton home
To the dishonoured threshold of her lord!
O wizardry we softly name a woman,
Divider and destroyer of the world—
All for the face of Helen, Eurybates!

EURYBATES.

My heart is heavy thinking of them gone
These many years, some dying unknown deaths,
Far from the rites that bring the spirit peace,
And some in urns so softly coming home—
Think you that Agamemnon will return?

TALTHYBIOS.

Who knows but happier they that yonder fell,
And in an alien soil unquiet sleep,
Than some home-coming after all these years!
Yea! I can think of one who best had stayed
On guard at home, than faring to avenge

Another's hearth; but, as the proverb is,
An ox be on our tongues, not ours to speak.

EURYBATES.

If stones had voices, the old house could tell
A pretty tale of these ten absent years.

TALTHYBIOS.

Alas! we are but withered-up old men,
Moving like shadows on the stable world,
With no power left us but the power of prayer.
O Zeus! that on the throne of yonder sky
Watches thro' veils of blue our little lives,
God of eternal justice, that through all
The wrath and wrong and welter of the world
Guards and guides safe the good to its good end,
Great Zeus, forget not Argos and its King!

(Enter the Watchman precipitately)

WATCHMAN.

The beacon fire! At last it flares to heaven—
Ilium is fallen and the King comes home.

TALTHYBIOS.

His wits are gone, with watching all these years.

WATCHMAN.

Nay, it is true—I saw it with these eyes.

(Enter Clytemnestra)

Orestes, A Tragedy

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Hail, friends! and share with me a new-found joy—
His tale is true: the æry courier comes,
Speeding by many a sea-lone promontory,
A kiss of fire from Agamemnon's lips,
As though he snatched a brand from out the blaze
Of burning Troy and tossed it flaming to us—
Can you not hear the shouting and the crash
Of falling towers, the ruining of fire,
And all the wail and all the victory!

TALTHYBIOS.

We have grown old with waiting for this news,
And yet can scarce believe it. Is it true,
Or but a woman's hope that it be true?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Am I a girl to bring tales out of dreams!
The watchman ran to me as still I slept,
And waked me with this wonder—and I saw,
Glorying the grey of dawn, the leaping light!
And all my life, that in a winter sleep
Went darkling for his face these widowed years,
Sent up a light of joy to answer it—
And then I lost it in a storm of tears,
That, like an April window, smote my eyes;
And still again I looked, and still it burned.
Let Argos put its wedding garment on,
And sing for joy, and be a child again,

Richard Le Gallienne

For Agamemnon's ships are on the sea,
And homeward sunshine lights the warrior's face.
Old friends, bear witness for me when he comes,
That I, true wife, have faithfully bestowed
His various trust, nor broke one seal of his
On chest or treasure, nor till now have known
A joy without him all these waiting years.

(Exit)

Orestes, A Tragedy

SCENE 2

Enter Talthybios, Eurybates and Chorus of Old Men.

EURYBATES.

I hear a murmur, like the roar of streams!

TALTHYBIOS.

A multitudinous voice of mighty joy!

EURYBATES.

The call of trumpets, and the clash of arms,
And the hoarse sea-like song of victory!—
It is the King—the people rend the sky.

TALTHYBIOS.

Zeus save us from the Furies in the shade!

EURYBATES.

Old evil hangs about the ancient doors,
And in the sunlight sable shadows steal,
And at the windows watching spectres stand;
God grant a happy issue to this day!

(A sound of people marching and singing. They

enter and surround the palace, followed by processions of warriors and sailors and Trojan captives, till finally Agamemnon and Clytemnestra enter in a chariot, with Cassandra, and the principal captains of the Argive army)

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Welcome, my King, and welcome, husband, home!
The old house of your fathers laughs once more,
That was so long a place of woman's tears;
And the old faithful love spreads out its arms,
To take you to your ancient place again.
Not, stitch by stitch, a woman's tale I'll tell
Here, in this laurelled hour, of all my fears,
Of lying tales that came on travelling lips,
And omens of the night, and whispered things
Of sea and wind, that moaned about the house,
Nor of a mother's aching heart will speak,
That scans your sunlit laurels all in vain
For the white flower of Iphigenia's face.
Let glory and gladness have their lyric hour,
And praise of the high gods that brought you home,
With such a harvest of undying deeds!
Whiles as we wept and waited, woman-like,
Through the long afternoons, against this hour,
We wove, with shuttles of our faithful hearts,
This tapestry for your victorious feet,
Patterned and purpled for a conqueror's tread—
'Twas all a woman's little might availed

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To have a part in this resounding day.
Disdain not, Agamemnon, then to walk
Upon this pathway of our woven tears.

*(As she ends, maidens spread tapestry before the
feet of Agamemnon)*

AGAMEMNON.

Argos again! First greetings unto you,
Belovèd land, and to the holy gods
Bowed heads and hearts, that had you in their care
These many years; with wordless joy I greet
All the old lovely faithful face of things,
Temples and towers and ways familiar,
And my old friends and my dear wife and home.
Long is the tale to tell of all our deeds
Since 'gainst the Trojan hosts we sailed away,
And saw your faces fade, and the sea wind
Went fluttering in and out through your farewells;
'Twill serve the hearth for many a winter's tale
And minstrel's song—enough that we have done
The work of Zeus, and Troy's adulterous towers
Are towers of wreathing smoke and licking flame:
So prosper evil-doing on the earth,
And insolence of lust and mortal pride;
For Heaven is just, and vengeance never sleeps.

*(Turning to Clytemnestra, and pointing to the
tapestry at his feet)*

Nay, let barbaric kings on purple tread,
Such state is not for us who know the gods,
How jealous they of mortal majesty,
And the brief pomp of swollen emperors:
The holy soil of Argos let me tread,
Whence am I sprung, and whither I descend.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

'Tis but a woman's fancy—let me have it.

AGAMEMNON.

A woman's fancy burned the towers of Troy.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Nay, let me have this happiness to-day.

AGAMEMNON.

Be't so, then, Clytemnestra,—but yon sun
Be witness that my heart wears no such pride.

(Pointing to Cassandra)

This princess, captive to our conquering arms,
The flowering last of a long line of kings,
Take with a royal kindness to your care:
'Tis gracious and well-pleasing to the gods
Mildly to wield the rod of victory.

(Agamemnon enters the palace followed by Clytemnestra and attendants)

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*(Re-enter Clytemnestra, addressing Cassandra,
who stands mute and immobile, in the chariot)*

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Nay, follow us, Cassandra, whom my lord
Regards with such a kindness in his eye,
Fear not such entertainment as a house
Of kings to a king's daughter may not lack,
Though she in chains.

(Cassandra makes no sign of hearing)

TALTHYBIOS.

Do you not hear the Queen?

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Hath she no understanding of our tongue?
When Agamemnon spake, she seemed to hear.

TALTHYBIOS.

The Queen commands you enter in the house.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Tell her, some one of you that knows her speech,
When Clytemnestra bids she must obey,
Were she ten times the daughter of a king.
I may not tarry longer, see you to it.

(Enters the palace)

CASSANDRA. (*Slowly turning toward a statue of
Apollo, and suddenly crying out*)

Apollo—O Apollo! Woe is me!

What house is this that smells of infants' blood?

TALTHYBIOS.

This is the house of Atreus and his sons.

CASSANDRA.

O bitter god! so to misguide my feet!

O cruel love! O too great punishment!

TALTHYBIOS.

Why to Apollo make you such appeal?

CASSANDRA.

Once, in a frenzy of immortal love,
He touched my maiden lips with prophecy,
And then, all anger, made his gift in vain;
For lo! the fearful future like a scroll
Clearly I read, but no man hearkens me.

(Suddenly shrieks as in horror)

TALTHYBIOS.

Why do you gaze so strangely on the air?

CASSANDRA.

See yonder, see you not? those wailing babes

Orestes, A Tragedy

There on the palace roof—and whence this fume
Of burning flesh . . . O horrible! I see
A father's children murdered for his food!

EURYBATES.

'Tis very strange, Talthybios; yea, she sees
Thyestes' meal of his own little ones,
That Atreus carved for him on plates of gold.

TALTHYBIOS.

Surely she hath some vision of the god—
But mark her now . . .

CASSANDRA.

O fearful house, all dabbled o'er with blood . . .
Blood, blood, in all the rooms; blood everywhere,
The whole red air one steam and song of blood;
And a dark sound of wings that well I know
In all the stairways and the corridors!
Yet, yet more blood I see . . .
The woman yonder—plain I see it all —
Even at this moment, murders in a dream . . .
Yea! her own lord it is—I see his face . . .
She traps him yonder in a silver bath—
The smooth white heifer gores the royal bull!
Horror! Yea! also my own end I see . . .
Ah! bitter god that brought me here to die!

EURYBATES.

You are distraught . . . here is no more than
madness.

CASSANDRA.

Yea! it was ever so! No man believes—
Though now the very act hangs in the air,
Gathering its lightning. So Troy mocked me once,
Turning deaf ears to all my warning cry.
The flaming towers I saw—they would not hear;
The shattered shrines, the falling palaces!
I saw Scamandros choked with heroes dead,
My river where, a maid, I gathered flowers;
I saw my father lying in his blood,
And all my brothers dead, with broken swords.
They would not hear—so cruel was the god—
And who is left in Troy to hear me now!
Belovèd land, no prophecy could save!
O double doom—in vain to see the doom,
Like one who calls out wildly in a dream,
And finds no help, held fast in horror's arms.
So to my death through yonder door I go,—
May the god meet me on the other side,
And give me back his love, and lift this curse
That makes me half immortal all in vain.

*(Breaks her wand, and unwinds her wreaths and
casts them from her)*

So throw I off these weeds of prophecy,
A doomed and simple woman of the earth.

(Again becoming entranced and gazing at the air)

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Nay! but it will not leave me, still it seems
The visions throng . . . horror on horror
breeds . . .

And a dim day of which this day is father
I see approaching, as a royal boy
Waxes to manhood, exiled from his home;
A day on which a son shall slay his mother,
To avenge the father whose last mortal cry
Is at this moment shaping on his lips,
And but awaits the opening of a door . . .

TALTHYBIOS.

Speak not such fearful things—we dare not hear.

CASSANDRA.

Strange that for you all this is yet to do;
To me they are as dead a thousand years,
And I a woman talking in a grave . . .

(Half opens the palace door)

Pah! like a grave it smells, this opening door . . .
I dare not enter—yea! sweet death, I dare.

(Enters the palace)

TALTHYBIOS.

She seems the very body of my fears,
The coming true of my most midnight thoughts.

EURYBATES.

Unhappy house! Will the sun never warm,
Nor the stars bless you, as in days of old!

TALTHYBIOS.

Nay! Fate's long shadow on the old house lies,
And the eternal ache of ancient sin
Curses the youngest heart in its old halls.

EURYBATES.

The stain of blood no man shall wash away.

TALTHYBIOS.

Only new blood new-shed shall wash it clean;
Till the last drop of recompense be paid,
Still shall the victims bleed, and still the house
Be made of shadows and doom and horror and death.

(A cry in the palace)

AGAMEMNON.

My sword! Give me my sword!

TALTHYBIOS.

What was that fearful cry!

EURYBATES.

Was it the King!

Orestes, A Tragedy

AGAMEMNON. (*Within*)

Cowards! Ah, God! I die!

TALTHYBIOS.

'Tis Agamemnon!

ALL. (*Wildly in fear and confusion*)

Is it the King?

EURYBATES.

We are so old, so old . . .

TALTHYBIOS.

'Tis Agamemnon going to his doom.

EURYBATES.

Shall we not go and knock upon the door . . .

Maybe . . .

(*Confused sounds within. The crowd murmurs,
overawed and irresolute*)

TALTHYBIOS.

The girl said right—Death waited there inside . . .
Though my old limbs shake, I will to the door.

(*The palace door is suddenly thrown open. Enter
Clytemnestra, sword in hand, her robe
stained with blood*)

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Yea! he is dead! I killed him with these hands.
Do what you will with me, you men of Argos!
My daughter is avenged, her innocent blood
Is paid for, and the man you called your King
Lies yonder dead beside his concubine—
Princess of Troy and prophetess forsooth!
But I must needs be patient, play the wife,
The humble fool and footstool of my lord!
Nay, in that hour, when, pitiless, he tore
Iphigenia from me, all my life,
That ran with woman-sweetness in my veins,
Turned to a deadly venom, and I swore
A mother's vengeance on her cruel sire.
And, had I joy to see the beacon flare—
Yea! for I knew the hour at last was come.
Now shall the shade of my poor little one
Wander no more, nor guilt of children's blood,
Unhallowed, hang on the infected air.

TALTHYBIOS.

Woman, you rob our ancient tongues of speech—
Can you so boast of so accurst a deed!

CLYTEMNESTRA.

The deed was good, and I am filled with joy,
And face the coming days with steadfast heart.
I hated Agamemnon,—he is dead;
I love Ægisthus—he, my husband, lives;

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And Argos, its old phantoms fled away,
Shall see the golden age come back once more.

TALTHYBIOS.

For us no King whose wife must murder for him—
The son of Agamemnon is our King.

EURYBATES.

Yea! what of him, Orestes, whom you sent
Bond-slave to Phokis—he shall be our King.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

No bond-slave he, but in the pious care
Of an old kinsman; he is yet a boy,
Too young to rule, and I would shield his youth
Far from this fearful Fury-haunted air.

TALTHYBIOS.

Nay, woman, tell us no such empty tale—
The very children here in Argos know,
The very stones, and shall the gods not know!
Yea! we are old, and all our strength is dust,
All that is left us now our sure sad eyes—
Beware of what the eyes of aged men
See, Clytemnestra, in the glass of time.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Peace! I hear naught but dotard wagging tongues.

(Ægisthus enters, and stands by Clytemnestra's side. Facing the people, she takes his hand and looks proudly into his face)

Here is your King, Ægisthus,—and my lord!

TALTHYBIOS.

You will remember—when Orestes comes.

Orestes, A Tragedy

ACT II

SCENE I

Argos. Palace of the Atreidæ on the left. On the right, the tomb of Agamemnon, a mound overgrown with grasses and wild flowers. Further back to the right, rocks and trees. Time—Spring.

(Enter Orestes and Pylades from hiding among the rocks)

ORESTES.

O Pylades, is this my father's grave?
The man that made me out of rocks and dreams—
My father, Pylades, does he lie here?
This warrior that has changed to little flowers!
And all the sound that once was sword and spear
Is nothing but a thought upon a grave.
I know the lot of man upon the earth,
Young as I am, dear father lying there,
The tasks of men so stern and terrible,
And all the stormy terror of the fate
Of him who holds a nation in his hands.
How can a woman know what we must do—
The dreadful duties that belong to kings;

She has one little baby on her breast,
And that to her is all the singing world:
But God put in our hearts the sound of war,
And the wild love of fighting for our land.
I was so small a lad, and only knew
The roughness of your beard against my cheek,
And all the lonely strength of your sad eyes;
But the gods sent you to me in many dreams,
Where I, a captive in a little isle,
Would hear you nightly call me, hear you say,
"Orestes, in that hour you are a man,
Return to Argos, and avenge your sire":
And, when the manhood grew upon my cheek,
To Delphi, at the gold Apollo's shrine,
I knelt for counsel, and his word was this—
"Follow your father's slayers through the world."
Thus am I here to lay upon your grave
My tears, my love, this lock of votive hair,
And all the holy purpose of my life . . .

*(He lays a lock of hair on the grave and turns
again to Pylades)*

How strange yon daisy, such a peaceful thing,
The children's toy, dare bloom there unafraid,
And the soft grass move idle in the wind,
Where the great King, all thunder and all doom,
My father, Agamemnon, takes his sleep!

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(Electra enters, followed by maidens bearing funeral libations)

Whose face is this with eyes so holy with sorrow
This April day—and all these weeping maidens
following her?

PYLADES.

It is Electra—let us draw aside
Within the shadows of the rocks and trees;
She brings her tears too to your father's grave.

(Orestes and Pylades withdraw)

ELECTRA. *(Approaching Agamemnon's tomb)*

Father, dread king, and in the world of ghosts
Still Agamemnon, I, your daughter, bring
These flowers of April and these offerings
Of honey and wine to your immortal sleep,
And on your stern and solemn sepulchre
Pour a child's love and make a childish prayer:
O send Orestes back to save our land,
Our golden Argos turned into a sty
Of luxury effeminate and foul,
Once such a land of soldiers and of gods—
Ah! send him back, my brother, with his sword,
To purge yon palace and to cleanse the shrines.
There is no man in Argos now but slaves,
For the foul thing that stole my father's throne

Put manhood into chains; I, a king's daughter,
Of a race divine, am but a slave
Within my father's house—yet I have dreams,
Dread dreams, that say the doom is coming on them,
The cleansing doom, and that Orestes' ship is on
the sea.

(Enter Clytemnestra from the palace: she approaches the grave of Agamemnon, and addresses Electra)

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Child, it is well to weep upon this grave,
And bring him all the laurels of the world,
But you who love your father with such love,
Why follow up your mother with such hate?
How can you understand, or how I tell,
The sorrows of a mother in this world—
You but a maid that never carried here
A calling flower that needs a mother's breast:
You cannot know—ah! may you never know
What agony it is to see the babe
That grew in your young womb, a radiant thing,
Carried to death to save a race of fools.
You never yet have known that fearful thing—
To lie beside a man you did not love,
And yet be mother of his lovely babes:
Ah! blame me not, knowing I must not speak
Of Agamemnon all my dread of him,

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I love Ægisthus—love came at the last,
After the long, long hatred of your sire,
And all the tears for Iphigenia's death.

ELECTRA.

Ah! mother, but I loved my father's face;
He was so beautiful and such a king!
I know so little yet of the sad world,
How can I know these strange deep things you say?
Only I know I loved my father's face,
And hate the sword that took it from my eyes—
That perfumed pretty copy of a king
That sits upon my father's golden throne.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Do we bear children, rear them in a dream,
And watch them growing in an ecstasy,
That when their faces mount as high as ours,
Their eyes dart flames out at us, and their tongues
Dare to talk thus! Daughter, beware, the gods
Have whips for thankless children.

ELECTRA.

The gods are with my grief, not with your sin.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Nay, but I'll find a way to rule your tongue,
And drive these fairy notions from your head.
How long in Argos is it that a child
Was set above its parent!

ELECTRA.

Since my father's death—
I said his death—I used no other word.

CLYTEMNESTRA. (*As if about to strike her*)

The furies rend you! Do you see yon hind,
Gnarled with long labour and borne down with
years?

Thou shalt be his to keep his cottage bright,
Fetch wood and water and make soft his bed . . .

ELECTRA.

Better the wife of such than of your lord.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

His shall you be ere nightfall—by the gods!

ELECTRA.

I see the gods—their backs are turned on you.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

O holy Zeus! my dream! so went my dream.

(*Exit, holding her hands on high, as in despair
and supplication*)

ELECTRA. (*Again approaching Agamemnon's tomb
and throwing more flowers*)

O send Orestes back to save our land!

Orestes, A Tragedy

(Finds lock of hair on the tomb, and starts back)

Callirhoë, what is this! a lock of hair!
A man's short curl,—Callirhoë, what is this!
Is there a man in Argos, after all?
A man's short curl! O might I see his face
Who dares thus honour Agamemnon's tomb,
Who thus in secret loves my father's grave!

CALLIRHOË.

It is most strange—and look you here and here,
Mistress, the new-made footsteps of a man . . .

ELECTRA.

If it should be Orestes . . .

CALLIRHOË.

But mark these strangers coming from the grove.

(Enter Orestes and Pylades)

ORESTES. *(Addressing Electra)*

Lady, two travellers we from Phokis come.

ELECTRA.

Phokis! my brother! speak . . . your news, your
news!

ORESTES.

I heard your prayers, but first the gods have heard:

Orestes is in Argos, 'tis his hair
You hold there in your hand.

ELECTRA.

Orestes here! O sirs, is your news true?

ORESTES.

As true as I stand up to tell it here.

ELECTRA.

O holy Zeus! and thou tremendous shade!
Not all in vain the broken-hearted pray,
But the blue heavens give ear, and the dread
powers

Of the dark grave work toward their answer.
But, sirs, what token bring you of your truth?
News strange as yours needs witness scarce less
strange.

Before I desperately dare believe
Words like the sacred lightning blinding me,
Give me some sign this is no cruel dream.

ORESTES.

Sister, I am Orestes.

ELECTRA.

You!

ORESTES.

Yea, I.

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ELECTRA.

Orestes!

ORESTES.

See where but now I severed from my head
The lock you found upon our father's grave,
And see

*(Opening his mantle, and showing a little robe
that he carries)*

this little robe, with figures wrought
Of dog and fawn, the same you wove when I,
A little lad, went to the Phokian isle;
And see upon my brow the scar I got
Me in some childish hurt.

ELECTRA.

It is Orestes . . . O 'tis wonderful!
My heart will break. It is too great a joy . . .

*(Seems as if about to fall fainting into Orestes'
arms)*

ORESTES.

Sister, dear sister, hide your heart awhile;
So many eyes surround us, so many ears;
I too would hold you here against my heart,
And so shall hold you when my work is done.

ELECTRA.

Orestes—my Orestes, who to me
Must father be, and mother, and yourself,
And my lost sister given to the gods;
At least my eyes may hold you to my breast,
Eyes that have watched ten years for this one hour,
Waited and watched and wept ten leaden years . . .

ORESTES.

The time of tears is gone—the hour of blood
Draws nigh . . . then doom, and ghostly laughter
Of the outraged gods, and at last peace,
Because the price is paid.
Electra, life is strange and terrible,
A web woven by unseen fingers in the grave,
And stained by dreadful doings not our own;
The deeds of fathers that destroy their sons,
And make their daughters fair and flitting things.
Voices and dreams and phantoms, things of air
And the dim dust, rule all this stable show
Of granite and grandeur that we call the world:
And we young creatures know not what we do,
Save that we do the bidding of a dream;
And know not where we go, save that we take
The pathway pointed by some shadowy hand;
And what we are we know not, save that we
Are things of magic sorrow and magic joy,
And deeds and dooms tremendous, and then—dust.

Orestes, A Tragedy

ELECTRA.

Did the dreams come to you as well as me?
Faces and cries and fingers in the night,
And a long wailing through the sleeping halls . . .

ORESTES.

Yea, and my father came in his war-gear,
Stood in the moonlight, and called out my name:
A god he seemed, all gold and glorious;
His voice was like a battle in the night,
And sternly sweet as trumpets in the dawn.
There in the moon he froze me with the tale
Of the dog's death they dealt to a great king,
The bath in which they trapped him, and the net
Meshing the might and fury of his limbs;
The pale-faced blundering stabbings of a foe
That needs must call a woman to the work,
Nor even murder bravely like a man.
There in the moon he stretched his maimèd arms,
Suppliant, toward me, for they dare not leave
The piteous corse its great war-wielding hands,
Lest he should pull them down into his grave—
And, as the day was breaking, he would end:
“Orestes, in that hour you are a man,
Return to Argos, and avenge your sire.”

ELECTRA.

So to me came he many a haunted night.

ORESTES.

But there were other hauntings—voices in my blood
Calling for vengeance, dreadful urgings-on
Within the very marrow of my bones,
And my whole body, as I came to man,
Grew more and more a horrid instrument
To work the retribution of the gods;
All my young days passed in a dream of blood,
And all my boyish sport to see him die;
My very thews and sinews dreamed of him,
And slew and slew and slew him in my sleep,
Again and yet again, through all those years.
At length it seemed the deed was ripe to do,
And I at Delphi, in Apollo's shrine,
Bowed low my head, for counsel of the god.
Like some cold star, the silver, solemn voice
Spake in the holy silence, bidding me
Forth on this sacred errand of my sword,
And warning me beware the fate of sons
To whom the blood of fathers cries in vain:
For, unassuaged, the ghosts of murdered men
Wander below, unhonoured of the dead,
And their spilt blood, till blood be spilt again,
Takes monstrous forms, and breeds unhallowed
 shapes
Of madness and of poison.

ELECTRA.

Had I a hundred lives I'd give them all,

Orestes, A Tragedy

So he might hear the solace underground,
Of blood soft 'dripping, rain-like, on his grave.

ORESTES.

Yea, sister, such a grief for such a wrong
Needs not the urgency of a threatening god:
It is enough to have a father slain,
Electra for a sister, and one's land
Beneath the bloody heel of brazen lust.
O sacred Argos, little golden land,
So big with deeds illustrious, chosen realm
Of men so godlike that the gods themselves
Mate here with mortals, and immortal feet
Walk up and down the rocky winding ways,
Fellows and friends of our humanity . . .
At last impatient youth has grown to man,
And here at last I bring my virgin sword,
Sacred to Argos, servant of the sky,
And executioner of the will of heaven.
Now, sister, mark me what my counsel is:
Pylades here, my friend and sword-fellow,
And I will first seek audience of the queen,
Feigning us Phokian merchants, bringing news
Of my own death—the rest shall follow on.
But now no more of words—the hour is here,
O sweet-breathed hour! O blessed shining 'day!
Vengeance at last—O father hear my vow,
And great Apollo watch if I do well.

(Pours libation on the tomb)

ELECTRA.

An unknown fear is on me—fail us not,
Dread shade, in this your own appointed hour.

ORESTES.

Fate, and not we, binds fast their hands with doom,
The stroke of destiny goes not astray.

*(Orestes and Pylades approach the door of the
palace and knock)*

ORESTES.

What ho! there.

(Enter servant)

SERVANT.

What would you, sirs?

ORESTES.

We seek the lord and lady of this realm,
With messages of high importance charged.

(Enter Clytemnestra)

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Speak! I am Clytemnestra.

ORESTES.

Lady, I bring a message to this house
I were right glad some other hand had brought:

Orestes, A Tragedy

To be the croaking messenger of ill,
And bearer of bad news to lofty kings,
No man desires, nor can welcome hope
As he who bears some long awaited joy
Singing about him. Would, lady, that I brought
Some unhoped accident of heart's desire;
But I, alas! have bitter news to tell,
Drear to a mother's heart . . .

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Sir, speak your news—you make too many words—
And count on welcome as befits this house.
(*Aside*) Where have I seen those strange grey eyes
before!

ORESTES.

I ask your pardon, lady, it was fear
To wound too suddenly with cruel news
That made me wind about to tell it you—
But know that Pylades,, my friend, and I
Are Phokian merchants here with merchandise,
And, ere we sailed, knowing us hither bound,
Strophios came hurriedly and bade us tell
To those that reigned in Argos how their son,
Entrusted to his keeping these ten years,
Is on a sudden dead . . .

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Orestes dead!

Nothing but woe! Will the curse never end!

ELECTRA. (*Aside*)

This day it ends.

(*Aloud*) Orestes dead! then let Electra die!

(*Covers her face with her mantle and feigns to weep*)

ALL.

Woe! woe! Orestes dead! Orestes dead!

ORESTES.

Alas! unhappy tongue such grief to make!

But I must needs be faithful to my word—

And further Strophios said, and then an end:

The little urn, with laurel twined around,

Waits there in Phokis—on your royal will,

There to be buried, or across the sea

Brought home to Argos and his sleeping sire.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

And we had dreamed that in yon little isle,

All peace and wandering waves, he should escape

The doom that here infects the very air,

And fills the land with phantoms—but in vain

Man schemes against the purpose of the gods.

ELECTRA. (*Aside*)

In vain, be sure, in vain.

Orestes, A Tragedy

CLYTEMNESTRA.

But I must call my lord to hear your news—
Go, one of you, and find the lord Ægisthus.
Tell him that news of import grave awaits
His presence here.

And you, good sirs, must needs
Be travel-weary; enter in our house,
And find such welcome as the best of news
Could not have bettered. Come, my handmaids
shall
Straightway prepare the soothing bath for you—
(*Aside*)
Where have I seen those strange grey eyes before!

ORESTES. (*Aside*)

The soothing bath!

(*Clytemnestra, Orestes and Pylades enter the
palace*)

(*Enter Ægisthus, accompanied by servant*)

ÆGISTHUS.

Strangers from Phokis, say you?

SERVANT.

Yes, my lord.

ELECTRA. (*Addressing Ægisthus*)

Good news is waiting for you in the house.

ÆGISTHUS.

What do you mean, Electra?

ELECTRA.

You may sleep safe within your stolen sheets;
Orestes is no more.

ÆGISTHUS.

Orestes dead!

ELECTRA.

Did I not say the news was good, Ægisthus!
Poor phantom! Painted fungus of a man!
The thing that grows up out of great men's graves!
Only a girl left—are you brave enough,
Think you, to try conclusions with a girl?

ÆGISTHUS.

Orestes dead!

ELECTRA.

Seems it too good for true?

ÆGISTHUS.

Hell-kitten, spare your little saucy words,
My thoughts were far back in a bloody hour:
I saw my brothers and the horrid feast—
The mangled flesh of his beloved sons,
Your father's sire served at my father's board;

Orestes, A Tragedy

You see but Agamemnon—I Atreus see,
And my young brothers slain—like kitchen offal,
Butcher's carrion, food of kites and crows,
Set smoking 'neath my father's shuddering eyes—
Foul jest too foul even for a devil's mind—
Your brother, what of him! See what I see!

ELECTRA.

Nay, but I see beyond—Thyestes see,
Your father who my father's mother took
Into his shameless arms—like son, like sire!—
And slimed the house of Atreus, as the son
The house of Agamemnon makes his sty.

ÆGISTHUS.

The gods see all—would all this blood might end!

ELECTRA.

Into the house . . . there may be better news.

*(Electra approaches the door of the palace, and
stands in a listening attitude against it)*

The house is full of murmurs, like a wood
Before a storm; strange feet move to and fro,
And muffled voices—boding unshaped sounds . . .
Ah! the clash of swords! Yes! Yes! again, again!
Again, Orestes! Kill him ten times o'er!

(A cry is heard in the palace)

O father, did you hear Ægisthus cry!

(Ægisthus cries within)

ÆGISTHUS. *(Within)*

Help! I am slain!

SERVANT. *(Rushing in)*

Help! help! they kill the King!

ALL.

The King, they kill the King!

(Enter Orestes, sword in hand, followed by Pylades)

ORESTES.

One dog the less in Argos!

ELECTRA.

My brave Orestes!

(Orestes stands as in a dream, silent for some moments. Then rouses himself)

ORESTES.

O but the other task, my Pylades!

I cannot slay a woman, Pylades!

Orestes, A Tragedy

PYLADES.

Courage! remember, 'tis the gods that slay—
They strike but with your hand.

ORESTES.

A son to slay a mother—nay, I dare not.

PYLADES.

That must you dare—or dare the wrath of heaven.
Do you forget the voice in Delphi's shrine?

ORESTES.

O let them send their lightnings—why this hand!

ELECTRA.

Remember what you swore on yonder grave;
Give me your sword, if you have fear to use it.

(Enter Clytemnestra)

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Woe! they have slain the beautiful Ægisthus!
O bloody deed, thrice cursed be the hand
That smote my sunlit tower of a man!
O child unnatural! O womb unstarred
That gave such offspring to the bleeding day!

ORESTES.

Dare you to love him still!—then dare to go
The way he went—my sword shall point the way.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

What, monster! would you slay your mother too!

ORESTES.

Mother, it is too late to call me son—

“Son” died with my father. This sword-bearing
shape

Is not a son, it is the thing Heaven makes

Of murdered fathers, and its name is—Death.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

You would not kill your mother!

ORESTES.

'Tis not I, 'tis your own deed that kills you,

'Tis the day you killed my father

Kills my mother now. You should have thought
on this,

The hour you smote yon golden warrior down,

And, robed in crimson of his sacred blood,

Made a new nuptial couch upon his grave.

CLYTEMNESTRA. (*Baring her bosom, in supplication*)

Can you strike here where you so soft have lain,

And, with vague little lips in the still night,

Sought in a trusting blindness for your food,

Murmured and muttered and battled for this breast

With baby fingers, and at length found peace,

Orestes, A Tragedy

And sleep, all perfumed quiet and milk-white
dreams—

Ah! little fingers, grown to wield a sword!

ORESTES.

Remind me not of that, lest it should seem
I but revenge myself for the affront
Nature put on me, making you my mother.
Mock not the name that I must never use,
The holy word more happy sons than I
Wear in their hearts,—foul not the name of
mother.

Nay! bare your breast to him down there in hell,
Who with his lecherous kisses long ago
Defiled the milky purpose of that flower;
A witchcraft fairness, sweet and soft for sin,
A lover's toy, a wanton honey-guide
To snare the soul of manhood down to death—
No breast for honest babes . . .

CLYTEMNESTRA.

If pity move you not, have you no fear?
A mother's blood—it is a sacred thing.

ORESTES.

Is not a father's blood a sacred thing!
I hear it calling out through all your words,
And the gods calling . . .

CLYTEMNESTRA.

The gods are very strange—who knows the gods!
What man is he full sure of their intent!
Me too the gods befriend—if not this hour,
Some bitter day to come, when you shall go
Hunted across the world by night-black hounds,
Whose eyes, like burning lamps, shall never close.
Man may with man take side, but nature's heart
Is kind to mothers, whispers oracles
Into a woman's ear unknown to man:
Let Agamemnon have his gods, yet Heaven
Has somewhere kindness for a woman too,
And he who sent my daughter to the fire
Shall not go scatheless in the courts of Heaven.

ORESTES.

My sister died for Argos—'twas the gods,
Not Agamemnon, snatched her from your side.
'Twas but the fearful office of a king,
Who more than wife or child or sister dear,
Or father or mother, must hold dear his land.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

Argos and Agamemnon and the gods!
What are all these but hollow boom of words,
That have no meaning in a woman's ear
That holds her human blossom in her hands.
Better a land forswear such gods as crave
A mother's heart-break and a maiden's blood—
Let Argos die for Argos, not my child!

Orestes, A Tragedy

ORESTES.

Beware, in this last flutter of your breath,
How you offend the holy presences
That watch this moment with their awful eyes.
O mother, go not sacrilegious hence
That hath so black a burden on your soul,
Nay, rather with some grace of contrite words
Take your last look of yon all-seeing sun,
For my young heart must still believe the gods,
And do my father's bidding, though I die.

CLYTEMNESTRA.

I do believe you do you know not what,
And you the victim are as well as I;
And fain I would call back those fearful hounds
Whose hot and hurrying breath is on the air.
Yes! take me to him then, for I would sleep
By that kind side, where only have I found,
In this short wintry watch of cruel days,
Some sweetness of the bitter thing called life—
I loved Ægisthus, loving him shall die,
And dying, seek his arms beneath the ground:
Yon shade and me the holy gods shall judge,
No maiden's girdle, nor a beardless boy,
All green and dreamstruck in a tangled world.

ELECTRA.

Even of death she makes adultery.

ORESTES.

The gods—not I!

*(Clytemnestra moves toward palace and enters,
followed by Orestes, sword in hand)*

(Clytemnestra cries within)

*(Re-enter Orestes, shaken and exhausted, with
staring eyes. Leans on Pylades. With him
enter two servants carrying the robe in which
Agamemnon was murdered)*

ORESTES.

O Pylades, it was a fearful deed!

ELECTRA.

Our father smiles upon you from his grave.

ORESTES.

Ah! but my mother's eyes . . .

How long ago it seems! Yet was she here

A moment since—soft breath and woman's tears . . .

Still the same sun . . . still the same faces here . . .

And still all changed . . .

Pylades, think you that the gods know all?

Methinks the work of gods too dread a thing

For shuddering hands of perishable clay,

And hearts like running water—I do fear

Orestes, A Tragedy

The deed I did was feller than the deed
It would avenge—that some old nature in us
Older than the gods cries out upon me
As a thing abhorred . . .
But 'twas for him I did it—

(Pointing to Agamemnon's robe)

See this royal robe, people of Argos,
See these bloody stains, these rents, these gashes,
This piteous pattern—Agamemnon's blood!
For him and Argos have I done this deed
That seemed but now the very will of heaven.

PYLADES.

Fear not, but smile upon this people here,
Freed from foul chains by your avenging sword,
That cleansed the land of serpents set on thrones.
See how your golden Argos shines again,
A jewel on the bosom of the world,
Laughs and is glad to have Orestes King . . .

ALL.

Orestes king! Long live our King Orestes!

ORESTES. *(Pointing to Agamemnon's robe and moving toward the tomb)*

Lay this as offering on my father's grave,
And I,

(Takes an olive branch in his hand)

this suppliant olive in my hand,
Will as a pilgrim fare to Delphi's shrine,
Kneeling for benediction of the god.

(Furies appear behind Agamemnon's tomb)

What shapes are these that glare so strangely at
me?

ELECTRA.

You are o'erwrought—come rest within the house.

(More shapes of Furies appear)

ORESTES.

Yonder again, away! what would you of me!
I did but what the holy gods decreed,
And my own sire commanded.

What are you
That mop and mow about me, and stretch out
Your bony fingers!

*(Orestes turns hither and thither about the stage,
seeking to escape the Furies, who menace him
on every side)*

What are you that shake
Your snaky locks, and with such baleful eyes

Orestes, A Tragedy

Pierce to the quaking centre of my soul!
O what are you, you webbed and taloned things
That steal like smoke about me and about!
See you these shapes, or are they, Pylades,
Nightmares and goblins of the tortured mind?
My eyes are filled with blood, and rending fires
Blaze in my brain—still, still they swarm about
me . . .
Is this to do the bidding of the gods!—
Horror! they are my mother's vengeful hounds.

CURTAIN

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